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ABSTRACT

Noting that the preschool years provide an optimal time for developing fundamental skills with lifelong implications, this paper examines the role of art in early childhood education, arguing that art improves the quality of life for young children. The paper maintains that art is the basis of early learning and that allowing children to experience art fosters the development of many skills, including eye-hand coordination and good work habits. Further, art fosters creativity and allows children to make sense of their world. Children delight in the process of creating art; early childhood art must be focused on that process rather than on the product. In addition, art can be used as a tool to foster young children's self-esteem and to give children the freedom to express themselves. Art enhances socialization in several ways, including encouraging sharing with others and permitting children to take risks. The paper argues that art activities provide children with an opportunity to experience success and that teachers have an obligation to encourage children and offer approval of their art work. The paper suggests that having a portfolio for each child's work is important for early childhood programs. Other suggestions include the avoidance of teacher models for children's work, and the mixture of highly creative and highly recognizable art experiences. Finally, the paper presents the findings of a survey of early childhood teachers regarding their opinion about young children's art. (Contains 13 references.) (KB)

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ART IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF LIFE: A LOOK AT ART IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Frances J. Alvino

This paper takes a look at the role that art plays in early childhood eduction. Art is the basis of early learning. By allowing children to experience art one can foster the development of many skills. Art fosters creativity and allows children to make sense of their world. Art is a process children can explore to feel happy and beautiful. Art is a means of fostering self-esteem. Art allows children the freedom to express themselves. Art can enhance socialization. The wonderful thing about art is that one doesn't have to expect too much or too little in the finished product. "Art improves the quality of life."

Frances J. Alvino

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Introduction

We have now entered the year 2000! Changes are continually taking place in everyday life and work. More so than ever children have to have an enormous amount of knowledge available to them for their constant growth and development. The preschool years are optimum time for the development of necessary fundamental skills that will have lifelong implications. These skills include motor development and language development. Research has shown that appropriate teaching in preschool and kindergarten predicts greater success in the early grades. As adults children will need to be able to access information through various modes, analyze situations and make reasonable judgments. They will also have to continue to learn new approaches, skills, and knowledge. Experiencing art will foster the development of all these skills because art is the basis of early learning.

Why is art so important in a childhood setting? I believe the answer is because of the beauty and joy art brings to a school or center. Walk into any preschool or early childhood class and become a part of a breathtaking experience. You should feel like you are in a "mini" museum of art. The hallways and the classrooms should be filled with the exquisite work done by the young artists. Your eyes should behold a vast amount of creativity!

Creativity

Every individual has the capability of being creative. Often it is hard to think of oneself as having a creative nature. Recently I was enrolled in a graduate art education class. The class was held for two weekends during the month of January. The hours this class met were from eight a.m. until five p.m. When we entered the cold classroom at the beginning of each class music was playing and an

assignment was on the board. Always the assignment was to "create" something using a specific type of material. The adults in this class, as well as myself, felt that this might be an impossible task to perform a eight a.m. on a cold Saturday morning! After a few minutes however it became apparent that we were all interested in the task at hand and all of us became very creative. Oddly enough, the task of "creating" was a very pleasant experience.

Creativity is one of the earliest stages of a child's development. It is only natural that a young child explores and experiments with his environment. This is how a child gains knowledge and begins to make sense out of his world. This exploring and experimenting is a form of creativity because it allows the child to draw conclusions and make combinations that are different from other people around them. Creativity peaks during the early years.

The idea of what creativity is confusing to most people because there are so many definitions for it. Generally, however, it is described as the ability to see things in new ways, the ability to think unconventionally, and the ability to make something that is unique. Paul Torrance, a well-known researcher in the field of creativity, defines creativity as the "process of sensing problems or gaps in information, forming ideas or hypotheses, and communicating the results." (Torrance, 1963). When one thinks of a child's creativity, it is important to think of the way a child views the world. There are numerous possibilities in a child's world. A child's attitude is what is important. How a child plays with something, uses his imagination, and asks questions are what makes him creative.

Torrance (1970) in his study of the creative process describes four characteristics of creativity: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. While using these four characteristics a child can and will produce something that is

unique- thus exhibiting creativity. These four characteristics can be applied to any of the artistic forms, for example, finger painting, easel painting, and using play dough.

It's easier to think of young children as being creative because that is when the peak of creativity arises. Adults, as I've mentioned, often find it difficult to think of themselves as being creative. I will use the example of two sisters that I know- when decorating their home each has a different way of accomplishing this task. Although both sisters put a lot of time and thought into the project at hand, one sister will decorate her home with ideas found at antique shops and various gift stores while the other sister will use a furniture magazine and buy the entire coordinated page. Is one sister any more creative than the other? It is important that a person practices the process and skills involved in being creative.

Art As A Process

Children delight in the "process" of doing art. Through their experimenting and exploring they can feel creative, happy, beautiful, or even sometimes frustrated. Anyone that has ever studied the educational method of Maria Montessori knows that a child will perform a task over and over again simply for the satisfaction it brings to them. An adult would gladly give up his work load for some time for relaxation, a child however, never gets weary doing the same work repeatedly if he is interested in the task that he is doing. Art is a process for young children- the result that takes place is not the reason for doing the art. Children get excited watching colors blend together or feeling the texture of finger paint. Sometimes adults make the mistake of giving the child the impression that a picture or end result is more important than the process of the art experiment itself. As adults we must try to change this way of thinking and try to encourage

children to experiment and explore. We should ask children to tell us about their work and how they felt when they were working. Try not to tell a child what to do, instead we should observe them doing interesting things. When children experiment they are unsure of what to expect. This is a far more exciting experience than listening to a detailed explanation of what will happen next.

It cannot be stated enough that early childhood art must be focused on the process and not on the product. The child must experience the satisfaction of his own work. The ideas and originality come from within oneself and no one can impose their creative ideas onto someone else. Older children may need guidance and instruction to work with some challenging projects, however, younger children should be free to discover results on their own. Naturally, supervision is required and instruction on how to use a new material is necessary, but the child should be able to use his natural instincts to begin and continue his work.

A classroom that is process oriented can easily be distinguished from one in which the product is valued heavily. Children may paint a picture and then not even claim it. I see this happening quite often in my preschool classroom. Children will walk by the easel that is always set up with paper and crayons and work on the paper for a while and then leave it alone to let it go unrecognized. Other children will do the same thing with the paper and then immediately tell me to write their name on it in order that they may take it home with them.

Sometimes judging whether a person is considered creative or not can be determined by their personality traits. This is called the personality approach used to identify the profiles of highly creative individuals. Torrance (1962) suggests seven traits that may be used to explain the behavior of creative young children. The traits are: curiosity, (a child will ask purposeful questions), flexibility, (a child

will try different approaches), sensitivity to problems, (a child can see gaps in information), redefinition, (a child can see hidden meaning in things), self-feeling, (a child has a feeling of self-importance), originality, (the child has interesting ideas), and insight, (a child will toy with ideas and possibilities).

Children need a supportive environment in order to be inspired to act creatively. Children who have never done anything exciting or seen anything interesting may have more difficulty expressing themselves. Research tells us that the greater the experiences a child has in his life the more possibilities he will have in his creative activities.

Obstacles in a child's life can also hamper the child's creative possibilities. Sometimes highly creative children question authority and may be misunderstood as acting in an unpleasant manner. In a school situation a child may be required to conform to certain standards that every student must adhere to. This kind of environment might stifle a child's imagination. Believe it or not, sex roles may limit the expressions of children. Boys may not be encouraged to participate in quiet artistic projects.

Intelligence is also a factor that contributes to creativity. It is incorrect to assume that someone having a high I.Q. will be wonderfully creative. The opposite is also true- a person with average intelligence may not necessarily have ordinary creative ability.

Teachers play a very significant role in fostering creativity in art experiences for young children. Some suggestions for encouraging creativity are: let the child have some choice and opinion in the activity, allow ample time for the child to complete his art activity, be flexible about how art materials are used, focus on the process and not on the product, have a discussion with the child while he is

working on his project, be prepared for any art presentation that you expect a child to work on, and be able to work with a child if it is necessary to do so. It is so important for a teacher to be patient and let the child tell you when they have completed their work. Never rush the child that is trying to use his creative talents. Do not give children the impression that the teacher's way is the right way of doing things when they are experiencing and exploring in the field of art. There are plenty of rules children have to follow in their classroom, trying to be creative cannot happen if the teacher's standards are always imposed on the child.

Teachers should work on the skills of learning what materials to offer a child for certain kinds of artistic expression; they should observe each child's individual style; be able to encourage development; and be able to give children praise for their efforts. By experiencing art and creativity, children can turn their ideas of their world into visual form. Teachers have to be open to children's individual interpretations of their experiences thus the teacher will become aware of each child's personality, interests, and skills.

Art And Self-Esteem

I believe that the most valuable learning that a child can receive in his preschool education is the development of self-esteem. Gaining confidence in oneself and feeling good about oneself is so necessary in life. Art is a wonderful tool to use in fostering this very important concept. Schirrmacher (1998) talks about how great it feels to be in a beautiful place surrounded by lovely things. A person can feel relaxed and comfortable and positive feelings can occur. How can a place be made "beautiful"?-naturally by the use of art. Everyone appreciates beauty and beautiful things. A pleasing environment will help children's aesthetic development and add enrichment to their lives. A "happy" and "pleasant"

environment will make it easier for a teacher to have a stress free classroom. Children will have positive attitudes and feel good about themselves. Children learn from their environment, therefore beautiful things should be in their environment for them to see.

Art Is Exciting

Where else can a person get so many choices than in the art world? There are really no right or wrong answers. Walk into a paint store to chose a color for your wall. Is it not overwhelming to see the amount of colors that you could select from?! Even if the color is narrowed down to one color so many different possibilities exist for that one color. I find this very exciting! With all the choices available in art children automatically gain confidence in themselves- thus achieving a necessary goal of early education. Because art is so individualistic children can realize that there are many ways of viewing reality. Art promotes success. Art allows children the freedom to express themselves. Freedom is important to children because developmentally that is what they need to grow. Even though there is freedom in art it still can have some form of structure surrounding it, (unlike structured learning of academics that is too difficult for early learners to absorb). When children say, "This is what I made" they can feel a sense of power for themselves.

Art As Skills Builder

Through the use of art children learn to develop many skills. Art is a pre-reading and pre-math skill. Eye-hand coordination is enhanced. Lines create meaning- symbols help in the preparation for reading. Language Arts is developed through art because a child can express his idea on paper and then talk about his creation. Art helps to develop the fine-motor skills that are necessary in beginning

handwriting. Children nowadays have to learn how to control a mouse for a computer. Art helps children to develop good working habits. It is impossible to work in an area that is messy and not organized and expect to have full creativity take place. Children need to organize their materials and get their working space prepared. Children also need to learn the importance of cleaning their art supplies and their work area when they are finished with their projects. Getting in practice with these good habits will stay with them for their entire lives and always be of value to them.

Art enhances socialization. When a parent asks me why a three year old program is good for their child I respond by telling them that in preschool a child first and foremost learns socialization techniques. Children learn how to share (two easels are set up for a class of eight to use, children must wait for a turn at the easel). Art permits children to take risks in a non-threatening manner, thus confidence is developed.

When children want to draw they must think about what they know about the topic they want to convey. Thinking skills are in progress and imaginative skills as well are being used. Creating art allows children to organize their thoughts into symbols and patterns.

The attention span of preschool children is not as extensive as that of older children therefore art activities must be developmentally appropriate. Children have to experiment with materials (example- mixing colors to create new colors). It is important that the materials and activities be appropriate for the specific age level. Safety is a must when working with art materials and some rules regarding the use of materials have to apply. Teaching children to follow rules can be used

in all areas of the daily program, after all, children and adults have to follow rules in all aspects of everyday living.

The philosophy of education that I believe in is one that uses hands-on experiences as the underlying root of learning. Children need to be exposed to numerous kinds of stimuli in order for learning to take place. Through the use of artistic materials children can learn so much about things they may not otherwise be able to experience (example- paintings of places far away).

The wonderful thing about art is that a teacher does not have to expect too much or too little in the finished product. A preschool product should not be too academic. Even helping a young child finish a puzzle can involve the use of colors. Would you ever think of asking a child to match a puzzle piece that is missing with the colors it matches to other puzzle pieces that have similar colors in them?

It is important not to allow children to become discouraged in class. Young children can quickly become discouraged if they experience too many failures, repeated disapproval, or frustration. Through the use of art activities children can gain success. Teachers have the obligation to encourage children and offer approval of work that a child tried hard to accomplish.

Art takes priority in my three year old program. When parents walk into the school their eyes behold a vision of beauty. The children's art work is everywhere. Seasonal topics are usually displayed. I love to decorate my classroom with the work the children have created. Naturally they want to bring their work home so I compensate for this fact by always inviting whoever picks the child up to come into the classroom and look at their work. Some children may not want their work displayed. Teachers must respect this wish and go along with what the child wants.

It is important to keep the child interested in art experiences. This can easily be accomplished by adding variety to the art program. Painting on an easel is tremendous fun but painting with spray bottles, feathers, sponges, Qtips, and even twigs can offer a new challenge and broaden the child's imagination.

Art Is Enjoyable

Art can be a fun experience for all. There are some things however that teachers must remember in order for the art experience to continue to be enjoyable. Teachers should always be prepared. More so in art exploration than in any other subject things can go wrong- spills can occur, or materials can run out. A teacher, if she is alone must have a helper readily available in case things get out of hand. All of us in the early childhood teaching profession have seen children that get too carried away with paint or glue! Have a clean-up procedure ready without hesitation.

Teachers should explore the numerous resources that are available to them. People who live in metropolitan areas have art museums that students could visit. There are many books about art museums written on an elementary level. Teachers should learn to be more attentive to the illustrations in the books that they read to their children. The art work in the books should become as important as the written word- after all, the children see the pictures, not the words.

Having a portfolio for children's work can be an important thing. A child's work is something that he can truly call his own. Cultural and environmental factors should be taken into consideration in a good art program. I have noticed that some of my students do not like to get their hands dirty- this I have learned may come from what their parents expect of them at home. I recently had a three year old tell me that her grandmother complained that the paints we used in class

were too messy. I explained to the mother that art is a form of expression and part of experiencing creativity is to possibly get paint on yourself. I suggested (as all teachers would) to perhaps dress her child more appropriately for the exploring the child was going to participate in inside of the classroom.

Teachers have to respect all work done by the children. It is a good idea to write the child's name on the paper after he completes the work so the child does not work over his name. Never should a teacher wrinkle a child's paper or fold it without treating the work with pride. It is important to discuss the child's work with him in a manner that shows you are actually interested in his work. Try not to impose your ideas or views onto the child's work- the child may agree with you just to please an adult. Sometimes no explanation is necessary in describing a child's picture. The child may have just felt like swirling the paint brush around on a piece of paper. For some children knowing that someone takes his work seriously makes him feel that his activity can be considered a worthwhile product.

When I began teaching on the preschool level I thought that I would be overwhelmed with the need to be creative and use only ideas that would be considered somewhat novel. I knew that parents wanted to see artistic results from their children. On the first day of class I'm sure many of us have the same experience with the parents-they ask the question, "When is my child going to paint?" They tell us that their child wants to paint when really I believe it is the parents who don't realize that their children want to "play" on the first few days! I had the dreadful experience of a mother who pulled her child out of my classroom after an hour or so on the first day because she said there were no paints available for her son to use! In reality, she was not ready to let her son go to school yet! Every preschool teacher knows that paints have to slowly be introduced into the

program after the children have become acclimated to their classroom environment.

It is important to avoid models of projects that are teacher created. Children realize that their work could never be as "perfect" as the teacher's. Some children may feel inadequate when they are expected to copy a model. Some teachers choose to use activities that are ready made because they are more comfortable with it. They basically can control the activity and the end result. Often teachers believe that it is an insult to offer a child a picture of a dog and tell him to color it for example. Children know what a dog looks like and therefore when teachers hand a child a pre-cut example to work with the child may get mixed signals. Still the debate remains as to which is the "right" way to obtain art activities from children. Some parents are more "pleased" when their child's work is highly recognizable. Teachers like to use pre-made materials for seasonal themes. I feel it is up to the teacher to offer a balanced art program, mixing highly creative experiences with highly recognizable experiences. Sometimes children want to glue pieces of construction paper onto a pre-cut pumpkin for example. Other times children want to use orange paint and call it their pumpkin. Both types of work should be praised and respected. My favorite example that combines the use of pre-cut material with creativity is when my three year old students make an apple tree. I give them very little instruction and very limited assistance. They are told to glue the "bark" of the tree (provided for them) to their piece of paper. Pieces of red tissue paper is then crunched up and put on their bark to create an apple tree. Some children put all of their "apples" on the ground, while others spread them all around the paper. The end result is that no two papers look alike in any way! The debate between the pre-cut and highly creative experiences will

continue because no two individuals have the same idea about creativity. Children learn by exploring both means of activities. Naturally, the more unstructured the project is the more expressive the child will be.

Every teacher should be familiar with the art materials available to her. Be sure that children have plenty of time and space when they are in the creative process. Make sure the materials are kept so that they are not used without proper supervision. Don't forget that the end product has to be pleasing to the child only and not necessarily to his parents or teacher. Always continue to praise the process rather that the finished product.

Survey

I recently surveyed a group of early childhood teachers asking them for their opinion concerning various topics and interests about art in the early childhood program. The teachers were unanimous in their opinion that art plays a very important role in their daily progrm. The survey concluded that all teachers poled had a variety of art materials available in their classrooms for their children to use. These materials included for example, crayons, scissors, construction paper, and water colors. It was found that most of the teachers tried to create an environment that was exciting for the children to explore in. Most of the teachers were able to give the children enough time and space to do their projects, however only some of these teachers said that they offer the child choices in their art projects.

Pre-reading skills were developed through the use of art with various worksheets such as dot-to-dot excercises, matching items and shapes. Other activities included following directions during art projects (example, left to right directions). Pre-math skills were developed mostly with sequencing worksheets or activities that included counting.

The teachers surveyed said that they enjoyed doing and creating art projects. Some of them used pre-cut materials generally during holiday seasons. Shapes were usually cut out by the teachers. An answer that I found interesting was that one teacher enjoyed doing projects that were initiated as a result of the students interests. In conclusion the teachers surveyed were in agreement that art played an important role in the learning development of children.

I once heard the statement that "Art improves the quality of life". Through the different art experiences that the teacher can provide children can learn to appreciate the beauty in the world around them. I will always encourage the development of self-esteem so that my students will become successful individuals (art activities will help me to accomplish this). I love to see the smiles on the children's faces when they have completed an art activity! Not too many children will grow up pursuing an artistic career but all children have the right to experience the excitement that the media of art can offer. Children will learn to appreciate beauty in their surroundings. Children will learn that choices in life will be offered to them. Children will learn that it is acceptable to express an alternate opinion of different topics. We cannot deny children the opportunity that art experiences can offer them. Art is fun and interesting so why not take full advantage of it's rewards!

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